

November 7, 2005

MEMORANDUM

To: Dr. James Sulton Jr., Executive Director

From: Chris Thompson, Associate Director for Academic Affairs

Re: Assessment

Proposal: Explore the feasibility of the Higher Education Coordinating Board leading Washington State participation in an effort to **directly measure student learning** in higher education, following the model developed by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, as reported in *Measuring Up on College-Level Learning* (October, 2005).

As you know, since 2000 a national report card on higher education has been published by the National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education. The Report Card grades states as whole (public and private, 2-year and 4-year sectors) on several dimensions. One of the graded dimensions is “Learning.” Washington, along with all the other states except five, received an ‘incomplete’ grade on this dimension again in 2004 because data were not available for the state. Five states were given a ‘plus’ grade in this category by virtue of their voluntary participation in a pilot project to report data on direct measures of student learning in ways that would be comparable across state lines.

In their report on the results of the pilot project, Margaret Miller and Peter Ewell write that the demonstration project “achieved its principal objective of showing the feasibility of assembling indicators of collegiate learning on a comparable basis across multiple states.” Pat Callan, president of the National Center, noted that such an effort, “is not only feasible, but also important and useful for policy.”

How would “learning” be measured?

The national model divides the domain of “learning” into three components:

- A. Literacy of the State Population – using the National Adult Literacy Survey and the Census reported in terms of prose, document and quantitative literacy.
- B. College Graduates Ready for Advanced Practice – using results from national exams required for entry to a vocation or profession, graduate school admissions exams and national teacher licensing exams.
- C. Performance of the College Educated – testing students on the verge of graduating from either a 2-year (WorkKeys) or 4-year (Collegiate Learning Assessment) institution. WorkKeys encompasses reading, locating information, applied math and business writing. The CLA reports results for problem solving and writing.

Why should Washington Measure College-Student Learning?

1) Support accountability

By getting directly at the specific matter of student learning, this approach can better account for the value of our state's investments in higher education. It might also open up new possibilities for enhancing our accountability framework to align more directly to the outcomes we seek from the system of higher education while appealing to both the institutional sector and policymaking circles.

2) Enrich the informational foundation for policy decisions

The model would produce information to supplement and support the data institutions and the state currently use to inform policy, budget and programmatic decision-making. However, this information would be uniquely focused on learning – not the more or less imperfect proxies for learning currently available, such as numbers of degrees, time to degree, or accreditation of programs.

3) Demonstrate the need for a more ambitious public agenda for higher education.

The conditions likely to be revealed by the resulting data hold the promise of more effectively galvanizing the will for change and improvement in higher education than currently available information has done up to now.

A major advantage of the national model as they have constructed it lies in reporting outcomes at the *statewide level in aggregate* – not at the institution-specific level. This fact could be decisive in winning the essential collaboration of the institutions. (Of course, not having campus level data also limits the usefulness of the report card as well, since we fund at the campus level, not the state level, and the campus level is the level of greatest interest in the context of accountability.) The information is helpful to the campuses' internal improvement efforts, while at the same time producing outcome data for policymakers in a format that would not be perceived as overly threatening to campus leaders. Statewide aggregated information on our state's stock of educational capital, and information on how much colleges and universities *collectively* contribute to developing that capital is not only less threatening, but more inclusive and in that sense more equitable. It sends the message that all parties, including the Legislature, should be held accountable.

Initial Steps?

Prior to seeking Board approval, the potential willingness of institutions to collaborate in such an effort should be explored. Costs and issues of logistics and timing should also be fleshed out. [Miller and Ewell calculate a range of potential costs to a state of between \$87,000 and \$370,000.] I believe this project holds strong potential for adding value to our state's system of higher education and is a natural fit with the policy and leadership role of the Higher Education Coordinating Board within that system. I request that I be authorized to begin exploring the feasibility of this type of effort in our state.